

# Vermont Commons School Curriculum

**Scholarship. Community. Global Responsibility.**

Dear Parents/Guardians and Students,

Vermont Commons School's curriculum utilizes collaborative, hands-on, and field-based teaching methodologies to develop and inspire intellectualism, practical skills, and grit. Our graduates tend to find themselves overly prepared--in the best sense--for the college educations they pursue after Vermont Commons.

Our students write and read intensively, apply Science and Math principles interconnectedly, understand Social Studies in the context of global history, and immerse themselves in World Languages through story, cultural study, and international exchange. They pursue a range of elective topics as well as yearly, ongoing study of the arts. Course offerings integrate topics into multi-year studies rather than as separate and distinct courses. Students further along in their studies have a variety of independent and self-designed learning options, from Contract Honors courses to Internships or specialized Diploma Certificates. This curricular approach and our small class sizes allow for creativity and collaboration. Vermont Commons students grow into critical and innovative thinkers, able to engage the challenges and opportunities they encounter in the world and seek means to sustain it and improve the lives of its people.

The vast majority of our faculty members hold advanced or terminal degrees in their disciplines, along with years--or decades--of work in experiential education. They are most valued, however, for their ability to inspire, connect, and collaborate with their students, both in the classroom and on the trail. This Course Catalog reflects their passion, innovation, and expertise. We are pleased to share it with you!

Sincerely,

Dexter P. Mahaffey, Ph.D.  
Head of School

Jasmine Walker  
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## **VERMONT COMMONS SCHOOL**

# **ACADEMIC INFORMATION**

### **Courses and Programs**

The central purpose of all academic activities at Vermont Commons School is to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and experiences to understand the interconnection of their local and global ecosystems and communities, to recognize their own roles in these systems, and to formulate a personal investment in their natural and social worlds. The study of place affords the opportunity to discover and explore how one's environment, community, and actions are interconnected with the rest of the world. In order to accomplish this goal, each discipline provides students with the opportunity to develop the skills to describe, understand, analyze, communicate, and interact within their local and global communities. The course of study in Science, Art, English, Mathematics, Social Science, and World Languages allows students to form the base for observation, inquiry, analysis, creativity and communication.

Our field-based programs provide the opportunity to integrate academic skills with real-world experience. The Electives Program includes arts and integrates analysis, research, and communication skills to allow students to explore new topics in multi-age groups. The rigor of the Encounter Week Program comes from its ability to immerse each student in a longer, more intensive study based upon a strategically interwoven set of intellectual, cultural, interpersonal and physical challenges in an environment well beyond the confines of a traditional classroom's four walls.

### **Coursework Requirements**

Vermont Commons School requires that students meet and exceed the Vermont state graduation requirements for study in English, Math, Science, History, World Languages and the Arts by enrolling in courses in every discipline every year. In the rare circumstance that a student has accelerated in Math by successfully completing Calculus 1 by the end of Junior year (or earlier), they are not required to be enrolled for credit in a math course thereafter in order to graduate. Similarly, students who have accelerated in World Language by successfully completing either Spanish V or Chinese V by the end of Junior year (or earlier) are not required to be enrolled for credit in a World Language course thereafter in order to graduate. VCS also requires that high school students participate each year in at least four hours a week of Elective/Arts courses as well as three Encounter Weeks, and the Wellness Program. Middle school students participate in an Arts course each semester as well as three Encounter Weeks, the Wellness Program. and Physical Education.

### **Advanced Academic Opportunities**

While coursework at Vermont Commons School is generally rigorous and intensive, several opportunities exist for students whose needs go beyond that established curriculum. Contract Honors, an alternative to Advanced Placement courses, provides students with greater challenge, complexity, and coursework in grades 10-12. Teachers make the option to participate in Contract Honors available to students who meet the department's prerequisites, and students then "contract" for additional studies and earn an Honors designation for those courses on their transcripts. For students of rare motivation and academic drive, the school offers three Advanced Diploma Certification Programs: the Visual Arts Certificate of Concentration, the Global Citizen Certificate of Concentration, and the Naturalist Certificate of Concentration. Begun prior to senior year, these special diploma certificate programs involve working with a faculty advisor on an advanced, long-term research or creative project, as well as review by and engagement with the broader community. On occasion, and at times linked with one of the Advanced Diploma Certificate Programs, exceptional older students may additionally enroll in course work at one of the local colleges or universities.

### **Academic Support**

Students who need to shore up academic skills, improve background knowledge, or struggle with their learning profile often seek tutoring. The Vermont Commons Learning Specialist coordinates professional tutors from the local community to work with students with learning differences. These optional services are based on private pay and may fit into study halls, lunchtime or before and after-school schedules.

### **College Counseling Program**

Vermont Commons School is committed to providing individualized college counseling to each student and family through a four-year program of information, test preparation, college visits, admissions guidance, and application support. Beginning in the junior year, each student works one-on-one with the Director of Counseling to evaluate his or her strengths, personal growth, and academic profile. With this guidance, students find colleges and universities that best match their academic, social, extracurricular, and geographic needs. The school utilizes Naviance, an online program, to assist in the college search and application process.

Throughout the junior and senior years, the College Counseling Office keeps students and families informed of college admissions events. College admissions representatives regularly visit Vermont Commons, and students are encouraged to attend the information sessions. In addition, the College Counselor routinely visits campuses in order to promote Vermont Commons and gather information to share with families. A listing of colleges offering admission to our graduates can be found on the school's website.

# COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

## ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The English curriculum at Vermont Commons School is integrated: students concurrently read literature, write creatively and analytically, and study grammar and the mechanics of writing. In addition to developing students' critical thinking and writing skills, our courses aim to improve their public speaking abilities.

The literature that students study is organized by themes that reflect and explore relationships between people and their environment. Students read canonical and contemporary texts from a variety of genres (novels, essays, plays, short stories, and poetry), cultures, and perspectives. While reading a text, students write journal entries and analytical responses, as well as craft a creative piece of writing that is similar in genre or theme. Several times during the semester, students receive feedback from their peers and their teachers in a guided workshop format. In the spring semester, students share an excerpt from their work at the Evening of Student Readings. With the guidance of student editors, the English department also publishes *Uncommon*, a literary magazine that showcases the students' best writing from throughout the year.

### **Introductory English Sampler: Reading, Creative Writing, and Critical Thinking**

#### *6th grade*

This class is centered around cultivating a love for reading as well as an introduction to creative writing, analytical writing, and critical thinking. Our goal in this class is to read, read, read, and throw in a dash of writing and conversation. We start the year discussing the book that many of you read over the summer. Throughout the semester, we will collectively read and discuss several books, including *Harriet the Spy*, by Louise Fitzhugh, *Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier, *Hurricane Child* by Kacen Callender, and *I Was Their American Dream*, Malaka Gharib. Throughout the year, students are also encouraged to choose their own books for independent reading. We keep reading logs, as well as physical notebooks in which everyone is encouraged to experiment and respond creatively to their readings, and these can include both doodles and text. During our classes together, we read individually, write, and talk. We also take time to develop our storytelling and creative writing skills, and work on a few basic grammar tools to help prepare 6th graders for their future English classes.

### **Place and Identity**

#### *7th Grade*

Seventh Grade English focuses on helping students become highly competent and confident readers and writers. This year, students begin to look at the strategies authors use to construct meaning. They notice these strategies in poetry, short stories, essays, and novels, and they practice them in their own writing. Students write creatively, analytically, and persuasively, and are expected to keep

up with their independent reading throughout the year. This is also the year when students master the 8 parts of speech, and start to see words and sentences as tools they can manipulate. Some of the themes for the year include how the environment affects identity and how writers use words to promote justice. Texts that have been read in this class include *The Outsiders*, *Before We Were Free*, *Call of the Wild*, *A Long Way Home*, and *Full Cicada Moon*.

## **Finding Myself in the World**

### *8th Grade*

In this course, students investigate various characters' adolescent struggles as they confront their own inner journeys toward adulthood. Typical texts for this class include *The 57 Bus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *House on Mango Street*. To foster a love for reading, we also have free reading units. This class includes a unit on constructing an argument. After students learn the essential aspects of persuasive writing, they write their own text-based argument. Students also participate in Vermont's Poetry Out Loud to improve public speaking skills. With a focus on the use of poetic devices, they teach a poem to the class and compose their own poems. Over the course of the year, students write creatively and formally. This class advances students' vocabularies, improves their writing capacities, and helps them think critically and creatively about values and beliefs.

## **Global Journeys**

### *9th Grade*

If travel encourages us to better understand our own homes and ourselves, then so does this travel-themed class. Drawing from a variety of genres, the course explores travels into wilderness, travels into our memories, as well as journeys into other cultures and lands. A primary goal of the class is to reflect upon the importance of learning through encounters with difference. Typical texts include *Persepolis*, *Into the Wild*, and *Things Fall Apart*. Students also pursue independent reading. To practice presentation skills, students participate in Vermont's Poetry Out Loud competition. Students craft analytical essays, short stories, and poetry, as well as a research project on the journey of one of their immediate family members or ancestors. The course includes instruction in the basics of essay writing and MLA documentation, as well as a focus on vocabulary and grammar.

## **Rhetorical Analysis and Social Commentary**

### *10th Grade*

English 10 focuses on rhetorical analysis and social commentary. We use a variety of texts to examine the strategies authors use to write persuasively and to effect change. Students read closely, identifying writers' tools; they analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate poetry, drama, novels, and nonfiction. Each of our assignments is designed to help students develop their critical thinking, reading, writing, and presenting skills. This course aligns with an introductory college level rhetoric and writing course which teaches students to develop evidence based arguments and essays. Texts

that are read together in the 10th grade may include *The Jungle*, *The River Between*, “White Man’s Guilt,” *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Sun is also a Star*.

## **Critical Theory**

### *11th Grade*

Students in this course practice applying different literary theories to classical and contemporary texts, as well as to popular media. One of the goals of this class is to understand that meaning, at least literary meaning, depends heavily upon the theoretical approach that is applied. Our textbook, *Using Critical Theory*, introduces students to the complex world of social and literary theory—a world that students will encounter repeatedly in their university studies. Theories covered include psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, queer theory, postcolonial criticism, and African-American studies. Literary texts include *Beloved*, *Hamlet*, *Dilemma of a Ghost*, and a wide selection of short stories and poems. Another goal of the class is to use theory to understand ourselves and the world around us. To this end, students apply theories to television shows, advertisements, films, song lyrics, and video games. In addition to several analytical writing assignments, students craft texts of their own, including short stories, poems, and personal essays. Students participate in Harkness discussions and design their own production of *Hamlet*. This course prepares students for the work they will do in their 12th grade English class, Single Author Study.

## **Single Author Study**

### *12th Grade Fall Semester*

The Single-Author Study is designed to teach students to write a college-level analytical paper on a topic that interests them. During the course, students work through the process of creating an advanced study of an author’s body of work by building on their knowledge of literary theory and analytical skills. Students identify a critical approach that they use to interpret the texts they read by their chosen author. By the end of this course, students are familiar with the process of reading for the purpose of analysis, conducting research, creating an annotated bibliography, and producing a college-level thesis paper. In addition, students write an author imitation and become expert editors.

## **The Memoir**

### *12th Grade Spring Semester*

In Memoir class, we read, listen to, and study memoirs from a variety of authors, and students compose their own memoirs using some of the techniques they learn from the professionals. Some of the professional memoirs we read include those by Patti Smith, Trevor Noah, David Sedaris, Dave Eggers, Asha Bandele, and Jennifer Finney Boyland. We experiment with different purposes, points of view, tones, moods, and formats. A strong emphasis is placed on writing with specifics, vivid descriptions, realistic dialogue, and emotional responses to situations. Writing prompts and exercises culminate in a final project consisting of a creative cover, a table of contents, an introduction, and at least 16 edited memoirs.

## **MATHEMATICS DEPARTMENT**

The Vermont Commons Math curriculum is designed to inspire curiosity in students by leading them to seek, explore, and communicate patterns in the world using mathematics. The integrated curriculum ties together the disciplines of mathematics: arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, statistics and calculus, exposing students to increasingly complex concepts and skills as they progress from class to class. As a result, students develop into creative, intuitive, skillful problem-solvers who are prepared to excel in college level math classes, as well as in fields such as science, engineering and technology.

### **Math 0: Approaches to Problem Solving**

#### *6<sup>th</sup> Grade*

The 6<sup>th</sup> grade math curriculum provides foundational knowledge in many topics in order to prepare students for math in future years. Topics include ratios and proportions, statistics and graphing, algebraic functions, and area and volume of geometric figures. However, the common theme throughout each of these units, and the essential aim of the course, is developing the tools to allow students to confidently and creatively problem solve. Challenge problems, games, and multi-step tasks are a part of every week, and students learn that there is no one right way to find a solution, and that documenting thinking is essential to success. While 6<sup>th</sup> grade math is taught as an independent course, it is intensively linked with science. Therefore, the curriculum is designed so that skill development and content consistently overlaps and supports the science curriculum.

### **Math 1: Pre-Algebra & Scale Geometry**

This course provides an introduction to basic mathematics, algebra, geometry, and statistics & probability. The first semester begins with an exploration of ratios and proportional relationships highlighting their usefulness to solve problems such as percent increase and decrease, scale modeling, and unit conversions. Next, students manipulate number operations with rational numbers where they create and use expressions and equations to represent and solve problems. Students are then introduced to scale modeling to solve two- and three-dimensional geometric problems. The year culminates with a study of sampling methods to gather student-generated data to interpret patterns and an introduction to probability, and how it can be used within these sampling methods.

### **Math 2: Beginning Algebra & Similarity/Dilation Transformation**

This course provides more foundational understanding for the branches of mathematics. Students begin the year with study of geometric transformation, dilation to extend their understanding of similarity. This leads to a linear models unit where students model data using the slope-intercept equation. More abstract traditional algebra begins next as we use linear equations to solve for an

unknown variable, solve multi-step equations, and create models of situations using systems of equations and solve them algebraically using different methods. Next, students explore more advanced number operations, including exponents, scientific notation, radicals, and work with irrational numbers. The year concludes with volume of solid figures, focusing on volume of cylinders, cones, and spheres.

### **Math 3: Algebraic and Geometric Systems**

This course starts with a comprehensive algebraic review involving factoring trinomials, literal equations, and expanding upon linear models. In addition to reviewing topics from the previous course, students solve linear systems using multiple algebraic methods, solve linear inequalities, and perform regression analysis. Using linear inequalities, we identify a feasible region to make decisions in situations that involve constraints. Following this, we explore coordinate geometry and use the distance, midpoint, and slope formulas to identify polygons. Next, students are introduced to trigonometry and right-triangle theory. This segues into a rigorous unit on inductive and deductive reasoning where there is further emphasis on using logical reasoning in proofs. Finally, the year ends by looping back to algebra with a unit on exponential models.

### **Math 4: Advanced Algebra and Plane Geometry**

The class begins with a study of recursive sequences as discrete linear and exponential patterned models. This quickly transitions to a comprehensive study of what makes a function: their uses in modeling and representing data, making predictions with them with an equation, and how they can be “transformed.” Functions of interest include -- though are not be limited by—linear, absolute value, quadratic, cubic, cube root, square root, exponential, logarithmic and rational. Particular emphasis is placed on exponential and logarithmic models. Students explore the significance that domain and range have on the constraints regarding how those functions can be used. As the second half of the year commences, students experience an in-depth study of quadratics. In this unit, many connections between math and physics are explored. This segues to the geometry of circles where students delve into the abstract world of plane geometry with circles as the context.

### **Statistics**

*Prerequisite: Math 4 or pre-calculus*

*Recommended for seniors*

This course explores a statistical approach to decision making under uncertainty. Topics include descriptive statistics, probability distributions, inferential statistics, confidence intervals, hypothesis testing, linear regression and correlation. The focus of this class is on the use of statistics as a tool to help navigate through an uncertain world of stats, facts, data, information, and persuasive arguments generated by entities that may not have your best interest in mind. As a consumer of information it is important to know when this information is significant and when it is meaningless. As a distributor of information it is useful to know how to present your data/argument in a clear and

truthful manner. As a decision maker it is useful to know how to base decisions on statistical evidence and protect yourself from uncertainties.

### **Pre-Calculus**

*Prerequisite: Math 4 with a grade of 80% or higher*

In the first semester, students explore function manipulation, specifically looking at the behavior of parent functions from Math 4 as piecewise, composite, and inverse functions. . This is followed by a unit on Unit Circle trigonometry (sine, cosine, tangent, secant, cosecant, and cotangent) and the use of this knowledge as it applies to trigonometric proof and modeling. The second semester continues with an in-depth study of Polynomial Functions, Rational Functions, and a brief review of Radical Functions.. From here, we move away from our study of functions, to wrap up the year exploring Conic Sections, analyzing and comparing their graphs, and why they behave the way they do from an algebraic perspective.

### **Calculus**

*Prerequisite: Pre-calculus with a grade of 80% or higher*

Calculus focuses on the fundamental tenets of derivatives, limits, and integrals. Students explore rates of change and the area under a curve to apply these ideas to physical situations. Next, derivatives of cyclical situations with sinusoidal functions are examined to model periodic situations. Students grapple with many computational methods for both derivatives and integrals, including product rule, chain rule, quotient rule, and “u” substitution. The second semester focuses on the integrals and derivatives of exponential and logarithmic functions. In the final unit, students incorporate their knowledge of function behavior to sketch curves and find the volume of a solid generated by the revolution of the area between two curves.

## **SCIENCE DEPARTMENT**

The goal of the Vermont Commons School Science program is to produce Naturalists, scientists who understand the environment and their place within that system. The VCS science curriculum uses STEM principles and practices to help students understand the connections among Chemistry, Physics, and Biology. The guiding principles of the department are two-fold: to create naturalists who will be able to use the Scientific Method to identify the keystone questions within a particular system, answer them thoughtfully, and then act upon the new knowledge. Secondly, that naturalists graduate from VCS confident in their scientific literacy and ability to proactively apply technical knowledge and critical thinking in their roles as engaged citizens in their community. Traditional scientific disciplines are split into semester courses over multiple years to foster an understanding of the interconnectedness of all science.

### **The World of Science!!!**

### *6th Grade*

The sixth grade science curriculum is broken into two parts: the first part of the year is dedicated to the physical sciences, primarily topics in chemistry and physics, this is then followed by an introduction to ecological sciences. Much of the first semester curriculum is adapted from a program called Foundational Approaches in Science Teaching (FAST). FAST emphasizes hands-on experiences through which students discover important science concepts and develop laboratory and thinking skills, therefore much of class time is spent performing and discussing laboratory experiments. The ecology curriculum is a mixture of in-class experiments and field-science explorations. Throughout the year, students partake in large-scale design projects, which provide them an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the material through creative problem solving and help to develop their skills as innovators. Ultimately, the main goals of the course are for students to develop a love of science and of problem solving, and to generate strong foundational skills with deep conceptual understanding. While sixth grade science is taught as an independent course, it is intensively linked with math. Therefore, the curriculum is designed so that skill development and content consistently overlaps and supports the math curriculum.

### **The Living Vermont**

#### *7th Grade*

In this field-based class, students learn the basic principles and practices of ecological interpretation with specific focus on understanding native biodiversity and ecology. This course provides students with a firm foundation of local knowledge that will be drawn upon for the rest of their careers at VCS. The primary interpretive tool we use is a naturalist's field journal. Students are expected to recognize as many as 100 local animals and plants from sight/sound. Field journals are the backbone of the course; every organism we encounter is recorded in this journal. Classes are held in the field regularly.

### **Scientific Methods**

#### *8th Grade Semester Course*

A primary emphasis in science education at VCS is to produce students that not only know the scientific method, but are able to apply it to answer questions about the natural world. The eighth grade Scientific Methods class has been designed with that purpose in mind: to create skilled, knowledgeable and confident experimenters. In this semester-long course students examine the history of the scientific process as well as study and repeat famous science experiments. In addition, students learn to apply the scientific method as they complete investigations in multiple disciplines and conduct experiments of their own design.

### **Design Thinking**

#### *8th Grade Semester Course*

This course exposes students to the engineering design process through a series of design challenges. To develop solutions to these challenges, students employ understanding of scientific concepts as well as artistic creativity. Projects are designed to require significant prototyping, testing, and revision, with emphasis on the value of “failure” during testing as an essential part of an effective design process. Design challenges presented during the semester expose students to computer-assisted drafting (CAD) and 3D printing, as well as the basics of electromechanical design and computer programming. At different times during the semester students work both individually as well as in project teams, enabling them to develop skills in both self-reliance and collaboration.

## **Chemistry I**

### *9th Grade Semester Course*

In this course, students examine key concepts in chemistry in the context of developing laboratory and quantitative analysis skills. The class begins by studying the properties of matter at the macroscopic and atomic levels, including models of atoms. Students distinguish among physical, chemical, and nuclear changes in matter. Students become proficient users of the Periodic Table and use it to understand such concepts as isotopes, atomic number, electronegativity, and chemical bonding. Study of the evolution of atomic theory from the time of the ancient Greeks through the modern day illustrates science’s role in the continuous improvement of human understanding of the natural world. Laboratory activities throughout the semester develop students’ scientific skills, including logical thinking and problem solving, execution of experiments at the lab bench, data collection and analysis, and collaboration and communication skills.

## **Biology I**

### *9th Grade Semester Course*

The first half of this class focuses on cellular processes, especially with respect to protein synthesis, metabolism, and genetics. Building on their chemistry experience, students learn the basics of organic chemistry while focusing on the processes of photosynthesis and cellular respiration. Group projects around emerging biotechnologies and forensics are the primary basis of evaluation. The second half is devoted to comparative anatomy of animals. A systems-based approach reveals the evolution of the animal body plan, always comparing other systems to mammalian organ systems. This is an intensive lab course, and most of the second half is spent dissecting multiple specimens.

## **Physics I**

### *10th Grade Semester Course*

This course uses the study of motion to introduce students to the overarching goal of physics – explanation of the behavior of matter and energy in the precise language of mathematics. The course begins with study of kinematics, introducing students to vector and scalar quantities and using the kinematic equations to analyze one- and two-dimensional motion. Newton’s Laws of Motion are the foundation of a unit on dynamics, which also includes study of Newton’s Law of Universal

Gravitation as well as the effects of friction on the motion of objects. The course makes frequent use of demonstrations, short activities, and hypothesis-driven lab experiments to enable students to make hands-on connections to the concepts introduced in the course. In a term project, students apply their understanding to a topic of their choosing, using video analysis as a tool to enable quantitative description of the motion of selected objects.

## **Biology II**

### *10th Grade Semester Course*

The class focuses on the history of evolutionary theory including the history of the belief system vs. scientific method debate to explain the origin and variation of life on Earth, pre-Darwinian theories (Lamarck, etc.), Darwin, and modern theories. During class, lab, and public presentations, students engage with the Evolution/Creation/Intelligent Design debate. Students appreciate the pros and cons of the various viewpoints, and learn how to respectfully engage others in this very hot topic. In the second half of the class, students study modes of selection, heritability, co-evolution, levels of selection, and altruism. Finally, students participate in an exercise called 'The Gibbon Genome Project' that teaches them how humans have been using evolution (via artificial selection) for tens of thousands of years to domesticate animals and plants. During this section, students work to solve the riddle of the genetic language of a fictitious primate.

## **Physics II**

### *11th Grade Semester Course*

The transfer of energy from one form to another is the unifying theme in this course. Beginning with study of the mechanical energy objects contain, we then move into the concepts of momentum and impulse and their role in understanding the transfer of energy between interacting objects. A significant portion of the semester is devoted to the study of electricity and magnetism, including simple electrical circuits and the generation of electrical power. Students build and analyze simple circuits, and take apart common electrical devices to see how the underlying concepts are applied in everyday life.

## **Chemistry II**

### *11th Grade Semester Course*

This course leverages the math and science skills students have acquired over 2+ years of high school-level coursework to more deeply understand the phenomena that drive chemical reactions. The course begins by using examples of chemical reactions using commonplace materials to develop student skills in stoichiometry and other similar calculations that are essential to the modern application of chemistry. We then apply those skills to understanding acid-base reactions and chemical equilibrium, exploring their roles in everyday life. Building on the understanding of energy developed by students during Physics II, we then undertake an extensive study of energy changes associated with chemical reactions and factors that influence the rate of chemical reactions.

## **Electives**

### *12th Grade*

In the senior year, students vote to select science electives. Most electives are semester long. Some offerings may include:

#### **Elective: Animal Behavior**

*Prerequisite: Biology II*

College-level readings and independent experimentation are large parts of this course. We examine the neural basis for animal cognition, the evolutionary forces that shape how animals interact with their environments, and how behavior shapes our perceptions of those animals. The first half of the semester focuses on interspecific behaviors (behaviors expressed between different species, such as parasitism and predation). The lab portion of this class focuses on experimentation, and individual lab reports represent a significant proportion of the grade. The second half of the semester focuses on intraspecific behaviors (interactions within members of the same species, such as mating systems and rituals, competition, and many different social systems). Particular emphasis is placed on local animals. At the end of the semester, all students participate in a narrated demonstration of animal courtship rituals or predatory behaviors, and perform them for the VCS community. Throughout the course, there are frequent readings taken from both historical and current books and periodicals.

#### **Elective: Anatomy and Physiology**

*Prerequisites: Biology I & Chemistry I*

The workings of the human body are explored in this course. We begin with a review of the formalized language of anatomy, enabling clarity in describing position and orientation of anatomical structures. Three organ systems are the focus of study during the semester: the musculoskeletal, nervous, and cardiovascular systems. For each, students study levels of organization from the cell to organ level, essential biochemistry, physiology in healthy and diseased states, and the scientific rationale for common medical interventions. Student learning is driven by independent research in specific topics of interest, followed by presentation of findings in class discussions. Dissections of appropriate specimens are an integral part of the course for each studied organ system.

#### **Elective: Zoology**

*Prerequisites: Biology I & II*

College-level readings and independent experimentation are large parts of this course. Students engage in a yearlong examination of the Kingdom Animalia. Using a phylogenetic approach to understand the evolutionary history of our Kingdom, students spend most of a semester understanding the invertebrate members of Animalia. During the second portion of the course, students move to the human phylum, Chordata. Extensive work in the lab involves dissections of everything from Shrimp, Octopus, Water Snakes, and Pigeons to Rabbits.

**Elective: Oceanography**

This elective examines the world's oceans. Starting from a purely abiotic, physical perspective, students learn about marine geology and chemistry. From that foundation, they examine the incredible biodiversity within those ecosystems. Significant group work takes place during class debates of historical and modern conflicts regarding the many uses of oceans. A field trip to the coast helps students acquire firsthand experience of these systems.

**Elective: Forensics**

A truly multidisciplinary science that leverages students' logic and creativity, forensics is an intensively collaborative science. While learning modern, cutting-edge techniques (in our lab and during field trips to the Leahy Center for Digital Forensics and the VT State Forensics Lab) students gain an appreciation for what is possible (or not!) from a technical standpoint. Throughout the year, we also examine/relive famous cases from criminal history to understand forensic science's impacts on our lives.

**Elective: Introduction to Neuroscience**

*Prerequisite: Chemistry II*

This course focuses on the structure and function of the human nervous system, particularly the brain. Exploration begins at the molecular level to understand the biology that drives the function of a single neuron. From this foundation the course then moves into the gross anatomy of the nervous system, including the regional specialization of brain structures to address different nervous system functions, and the ways in which modern imaging methods enable cutting-edge research into brain function. Utilizing their understanding of healthy nervous system function, students individually choose a neurological disease to study in detail, exploring both the causes and consequences of the disease.

**Elective: The Science of Water**

Water is one of the most fascinating substances on the planet, and certainly the most important for life. This course examines the chemistry of water, the movement of water around the planet, and global issues related to water quality and water resources. Laboratory and field investigations are key elements of the course.

**Elective: Space Science**

In this course students explore the universe through an introduction to a variety of academic disciplines: astronomy, planetary science, aerospace engineering, history, and astrophysics. Major topics are dependent on student interest but may include the creation of the universe and Earth's place in it, rocketry, a history of space exploration, or the search for extraterrestrial life. The lab component of the course primarily consists of engineering and design but, depending on time and

course content, evening classes to observe and chart celestial objects may also be included. Multiple field trips enhance our understanding through interactive experiences.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES DEPARTMENT**

The mission of the Vermont Commons School Social Studies Department is to empower students to be effective citizens and change-makers in their communities and their world through the study of historical and current affairs. Sixth grade students are introduced to the concepts of local citizenship. Seventh grade students consider their identities and sense of belonging as they understand choice and power in recent American history. The eighth through tenth grades take the long view of human history from ancient through modern times, always connecting the past to today, with a particular focus on regions outside America and Europe. Eleventh and twelfth grade students choose from a variety of fall semester-long elective courses. In the spring all eleventh graders take Modern United States History during their Spring semester and all twelfth graders take a course studying the history and modern role of race in America.

### **Local Citizenship, Global Responsibility**

#### *6th Grade*

6th Grade Social Studies is an introductory civics course at heart as we look closely at the workings of various communities through place-based learning that emphasizes student choice in the topics of study and forms of demonstrating learning. We study the landscape, history, people and idea of Vermont, from its first inhabitants to its current population. In this interdisciplinary course, students work on creative and formal writing, critical thinking, and oral communication skills. Students track their work by maintaining a year-long portfolio that allows for choice and encourages trying new forms of writing and expression. Daily routines emphasize the core organizational habits of being a successful student, and our routines also focus on practice of grammar, mechanics, and persuasive writing.

### **Identity, Belonging, and Community**

#### *7th Grade*

In this course students explore how the communities and places to which we belong, and the time in which we live, can influence our identities and the choices available to us. Students delve into these questions of membership and belonging by tracing the history of segregation in the United States and its social, legal, and political consequences. The course then moves to the present day as students apply what they have learned about identity, belonging, and choices to the topic of immigration, as students engage in local projects to help create a welcoming community that offers membership to every person regardless of race, gender, religion, or nationality.

### **Empires, Networks & Beliefs through 1500 CE**

### *8th Grade*

This course explores the global maturing of complex human civilizations, belief systems and the growth of human networks of exchange. The class focuses on patterns and systems of change, while challenging students to think critically and formulate investigative questions. Throughout the year, students are fully supported in the skills and steps of producing a major research project on an historical topic of their choosing.

## **Global Studies I - 1500-1800**

### *9th Grade*

This class explores the period between 1500-1800 as the first period of globalization and the blossoming of the modern world, with a special focus on United States history. The unifying theme of the course is the idea of a human web - the links that humans create to exchange ideas, goods, customs, technologies, and religions. Students view the global changes between 1500- 1800 through intellectual, cultural, political, economic, social, ecological, and demographic lenses. The curriculum culminates in the rise of representative government during the Age of Revolutions (American, French, Haitian), and U.S. civics. This class is discussion-based and includes analyzing viewpoints in primary and secondary sources, and debating alternative views and opinions. During the first semester students write an 8-10 page research paper, and during the second semester they engage in a major video production on a topic of historical significance.

## **Rise Of The Modern World - 1750--present**

### *10th Grade*

This class looks at the period 1750 to the present as the radical transformation of human societies due to the Industrial Revolution, the rise of nationalism, and the spread of imperialism. The course is globally focused, covering the liberal and national revolutions of the 18th and 19th century, the causes and impacts of industrialization and deindustrialization globally, the ideologies and technologies that drove imperial mindsets and colonial practices, the forces that led to the destruction and recreation of the two World Wars, and the lingering impacts of the Cold War on our world today. We use the OER Project's "World History Project - 1750 to the Present" for the majority of our course materials and our work focuses on building skills of sourcing, analyzing change and continuity over time, and building arguments about cause-and-effect across the globe and over time.

## **Modern U.S. History in a Global Context**

### *11th Grade, Spring Semester*

This class looks at U.S. history since the end of World War II (Cold War, Vietnam, Civil Rights and other popular movements, U.S. foreign policy). Every opportunity is taken to incorporate and draw connections to topics currently in the news. This class is discussion and debate focused. Throughout the semester we run a series of multi-position US foreign policy debates that allow us to explore

differing perspectives on the role of the United States in the great global unfolding. Students write commentaries and opinion-pieces, and develop a culminating project that digs into and addresses a global issue of personal interest.

### **Race and The Legacy of Racial Slavery in America**

*12th Grade, Spring Semester*

This course investigates the roots, key events, and legacy of colonization and racial slavery in the Americas. Students use primary sources readings, scholarly articles, and various forms of historical analysis to understand the way that European colonization of the Americas and the use of chattel slavery created a racialized hierarchy that manifests today in systems of white supremacy and anti-Black racism. A core focus will be the experience of enslaved peoples and their descendants across the Americas. This central analysis sets students up for independent research into the history and experiences of other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. The course calls on students' knowledge from earlier Social Studies classes, weaving this knowledge together to build a stronger understanding of political and social conditions in America today. The course relies on materials from the Brown University *Choices* Program and their "Racial Slavery In The Americas - Resistance, Freedom, and Legacies."

### **Electives, Fall Semester**

*11th and 12th Grade Fall Semester*

Students have a choice between mixed-grade semester-long electives on relevant topics based on regional or historical themes that expand into broader-based analytical historical methodology and content. Students prioritize the courses and are enrolled accordingly. Some past offerings have included:

#### **Elective: The Vote: 2020**

Here you are, on the cusp of being a voter (or maybe you already are!), in one of the most momentous times in our country's history. As you, your family, your friends, and your neighbors head to the polls in November, you'll be taking part in one of the greatest traditions and duties of citizenship. And yet, it's a tradition with a fraught and contested history, which tells us critical truths about who those in power see as fully American. In this course, we track the actual 2020 Presidential Election, looking at polling, media coverage, strategy, and developing news as it happens. When the election ends and votes begin to be counted, we take a step back, and learn about the philosophical roots and political history of the executive branch. And throughout, we wrestle with the history and current status of voter enfranchisement and maybe more critically, disenfranchisement, asking who controls the right to vote, how the distribution and withholding of that right reflects who is considered American, and who is left out of our national decision-making.

#### **Elective: Environmental Economics**

We need economics because that's how we make and get all the stuff we humans need, right? But we also need a thriving planet because, well, it's the only home we've got. So what happens when our economic systems say, "Grow, grow! To infinity and beyond!" and Earth says, "Ouch! Yer killin' me, here!?" Can we have endless growth on a finite planet? And - let's get deep here - is all this growth even making us humans happier? Should human happiness and planetary sustainability be economic priorities? What would that even look like? Through our exploration of the burgeoning field of Ecological Economics we explore a wide range of issues this semester including: capitalism, climate change & natural resource depletion, the American Dream, individualism & personal freedom, social responsibility, happiness & wellbeing, community & neighborliness, wealth inequality, debt & consumerism, and much, much more.

### **Elective: #RESIST**

While our current political moment seems to brim over with examples of political and social resistance, these forces are nothing new and have deep roots in the understanding of what it means to be a citizen. In this course, we focus on two central themes: the philosophical roots of political and social resistance movements, and then the tactics that movements across the political spectrum have used to pursue their goals for change. We ask how those who engage in social movements justify their actions within the framework of the social contract and the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. We also consider how a range of tactical choices, from pursuing social change through the court system to non-violent resistance to extra-legal sabotage and direct action, have led to either the success or failure of movements. After a study of some of the most prominent thinkers in the field of political rights and resistance, we will move into comparative studies of various movements. Our goal will not necessarily be to debate the merits of any of these movements or actors, but to understand both their justifications of action and tactical choices. The course is heavily discussion-based and assessments involve group projects, short essays, a student-taught class on a current social movement and a culminating study of a resistance movement, past or present, of each student's choosing.

### **Elective: Current Events, Engaging with a Complex World**

You feel overwhelmed by the daily news. You know the things that are happening in the US and around the world are important - critical to your life and your future, but there are so many of them, and they are so complex, and . . . you're not alone. Most people feel this way. This course gives us time to start to try to wrap our brains around the forces and events shaping our time. From the rise of China, to the transformation of Russia. From US policy toward the Middle East to Iran to Afghanistan, and all the way over to North Korea. From climate disruption to nuclear destruction. Here in the USA: from immigration policy to health care policy. And, of course, there will be all the news that will pop up throughout the semester that we cannot predict, but that we will tackle. We will have discussions and debates. We will explore multiple perspectives on issues, and learn to assess media sources. We will ask how history has shaped these current realities. You will have the

opportunity to dive deep into a particular current issue of your choosing, to research and analyze it in depth throughout the semester. And in the end you will come away with a couple of answers, loads of questions, and the toolkit to be an active, engaged, informed citizen throughout the rest of your life.

### **Elective: Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

How many different people claim Jerusalem as their holy city and homeland? What does it even mean for a place to be your homeland? In light of these questions, this elective course explores the intense conflict in present-day Israel/Palestine. Our focus is seeing the conflict from many different perspectives in order to gain a deep understanding of its complexity. Here's a taste of the many voices we explore: Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories (Christian and Muslim voices), Palestinian refugees living outside of Palestine, Jewish Israelis (cultural and religious), Arab-Israelis, Jews living outside of Israel, and more. Everyone has their own story to tell. We use literature, film, music, and art as mediums. The class begins with mapping, in an attempt to gain a sense of the region. Short weekly reflective and academic writing is assigned to narrate and identify different perspectives. Students do independent research on topics of interest and run class once/week. There is a culminating project that asks students to creatively narrate their nuanced understanding of the conflict.

### **Elective: Modern China**

How did China become the power it is today? Where is it headed? What goes on in the heads of Chinese leaders? What about regular people? To begin to answer these questions, this class explores Chinese history in the last hundred years through films, texts, student-led discussions, papers, presentations and guest speakers. We start from the end of the last dynasty, then move through the Republic, war with Japan, the Civil War, the major campaigns under Mao Zedong, the reforms led by Deng Xiaoping, and China's rise again to prominence on the global stage.

### **Elective: An Indigenous People's History of the United States**

This course examines United States history and the mythologies that shape our national identity. We explore indigenous America, the founding of the United States, westward expansion of European culture through indigenous lands, and the numerous hot issues that are in the news today; all from a perspective that is often missing from today's national discourse. Our vehicles for exploration include reading, student-led discussions, short and long papers, videos, and guest speakers. Upon completion of this course the students gain new insights into the nature of the United States as well as integrity in the telling of our nation's story.

### **Elective: Ethics/Global Ethics**

Ethics is that area of human inquiry which aims to determine the ways in which a person should live: What is moral? What is the good life? What are my obligations to other? And to myself? What does

it mean to be a person? There are two global crises which are impacting people and countries across every continent: economic inequality and climate change. In this class we focus especially on competing solutions to these crises especially in terms of the roles of human rights, democracy, economics, and violence. We also look in detail at alternative forms of organizations in business, society and politics, from indigenous nations and worker owned businesses to peasant driven sustainable agriculture and finance dominated global cities to terrorism and war.

### **Elective: Criminal Justice in the Age of Mass Incarceration**

The US incarcerates more people than any other nation on earth but it wasn't always thus. Since 1980, the US prison population has quintupled. Why? Is this good policy? There is a significant focus on the idea of criminal justice policy as a barometer of fundamental social challenges: racial and economic inequality and the cultural attitudes towards marginalized communities. Along the way we look at and debate a host of issues including: the death penalty, mandatory minimums, drug laws, solitary confinement, incarcerated youth, and the power of the prison industrial complex. We hear from experts and people involved on all sides of these issues from victims of crime to convicted felons to prison officials and anti-prison activists. The course concludes with a focus on models from other countries and a discussion of possible alternatives for the US.

### **Elective: Law and Order**

This course will be an overview of the philosophical roots of law and the rule of law in the United States, a practical exploration of criminal and constitutional law in modern American life, and an investigation of current issues in criminal and constitutional law. The course will be interactive and experiential, as we will center our study around actual cases, decision making, and a mock trials and moot court. Students will have several opportunities for individual investigation of areas of their own interest and choosing. We will focus on polishing skills of logical thinking and argumentation, as well as formal academic writing.

### **Elective: Decolonization to Globalization**

The second half of the twentieth century was largely defined by two inter-related and inter-twined forces - the Cold War conflict between the USA and the USSR and the emergence of a newly decolonized and independent Third World. While we might imagine the consequences of colonization and global ideological battles to be far behind us, just a small scratch at the surface of current events shows that these forces are far from being distant past. It will be our goal, in this course, to understand current global context and events through the lens of colonization, decolonization and the Cold War. We will ask, as Robert McMahon does in his introduction to *The Cold War in the Third World*, the degree to which the modern day political, social and economic successes and struggles in once-colonized countries can be attributed to the galvanizing role of decolonization during the Cold War.

## **ARTS DEPARTMENT**

The Arts Department at Vermont Commons School is committed to providing all students opportunities to create, experiment, improvise, and express themselves in a variety of artistic mediums. The department offers courses in visual art, music, and theater, with a unified curriculum centered around practice, depth, breadth, and play. Students analyze works from a diverse background of artists and understand the importance of art's connection to culture, community and social justice. Each student will leave VCS with an understanding of historical and contemporary movements and a robust portfolio in their chosen discipline. The arts at VCS are both a rigorous academic discipline as well as an avenue for joy.

### **Intro to Art: Introduction to mediums and techniques**

*6th & 7th Grades*

In this course, we introduce a handful of fun, basic art techniques and mediums to experiment with at home, alongside demos and group classes in drawing, painting, comics, mail art, collage, and sculpture. We make our own clay. You are guided through simple elements or “tools”: line, shape, size, scale, texture, pattern, color, space, and value, as well as principles or “rules”: composition, anatomy, movement, perspective, contour, and contrast. And, of course, we play.

### **Piano, Guitar and Ukulele Fundamentals**

*6th & 7th Grades*

Get ready for a musical journey that touches on many topics including: piano, guitar and ukulele skills, history, theory, and more! We also compose our own songs and improvise on a range of instruments. We study music from all eras including classical, jazz, blues, rock and pop. Each student gets to choose a song to learn and then perform at the end of the class. No previous music experience required.

### **Art History and Studio Practice**

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade*

This is a whirlwind art history course, but it is a fast and fun tour of modern art, from impressionism to contemporary art. As we learn about each movement of modern art, all the way up to what artists are making today, we respond to the creators that we learn about, experiment and practice at home, create our own works of art, and start to learn how to “workshop,” or give and receive feedback respectfully. Who knows, perhaps the art that we make in this class will become known in future history books as innovative, bold, and notable; the VCS eighth grade masters of contemporary art!

### **Songwriting**

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade*

We learn what makes a good composition, study music from many different genres and learn how to write and notate our own compositions for a range of different instrumentations. We focus on form, theory, melody and harmony and compose music in genres including classical, pop, rock, blues and more. We also learn piano skills that will help us develop and perform our compositions. Experience is welcome but not required.

### **Concert Band**

#### *6-8th Grade*

This brand new ensemble focuses on setting weekly practice goals and working to create individual, small group, and full ensemble pieces. We play a variety of genres of music (Pop, Rock, Classical, Jazz and more) and students are required to log 45 minutes of weekly practice time (in lieu of traditional homework). Each student has a short weekly individual/small group lesson, outside our class period. There are various levels of music difficulty options to meet the needs of both experienced and inexperienced players. Let's make music together!

### **Music Recording and Production**

#### *High School Elective*

This brand new High School Elective gives students an opportunity to turn their computer into a music recording and production studio! We use the online platform Soundtrap to learn about Digital Audio Workstation techniques including mixing, equalization, effects, MIDI instruments, panning, automation and more. Each student selects an instrument to make weekly goals and practice our recording techniques. Logged practice time each week is required in lieu of traditional homework. Students take a weekly short private/small group lesson, scheduled outside our class period. We share recordings throughout the semester and Contract Honors is offered to 10th-12th graders with additional practice and recording requirements. Students are required to have on-ear or over-the-ear headphones (not earbuds) for this course.

### **Voice in Art: Personal, Local, Global, & Professional Art**

#### *High School Elective*

In this class, high school students explore their "voice" in art. What messages, implicit or explicit, do you want to share with an audience, be it a small audience of your classmates, or a broader audience? Does art have to have a message, or can it speak for itself, as many creators have suggested in the phrase "art for art's sake"? We explore these questions in stages, from personal, to local, to global, to professional. How can art play a role in the community to respond to, guide, or even change the direction of a movement, or change someone's mind about a political issue? When we arrive at the "professional" stage, we create a website, learn how to take professional photographs of our art, and write artist statements. We learn the process of "workshop," where we respectfully give and receive both affirmative and constructive critiques of one another's art. If this sounds daunting, fear not! We also play, doodle, and write comic strips and zines.

## **Printmaking Techniques**

*High School Elective*

In this class, high school students have the opportunity to linger in the medium of printmaking; to learn about the history of printmaking, and to sample various techniques such as textile design, relief block-print carving, monotype/monoprints, collographs, and possibly screen-printing. There may be an opportunity for students in this elective to visit the studios of the Iskra screen-printing collective in downtown Burlington.

## **Comics Intensive**

*High School Elective*

Did you know that there is a school in Vermont devoted to the study and creation of comics? Well, students in this high-school elective won't be taking courses at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, but we may take a field trip to see professional comic artists in action. In this course, students get an introduction to the grand and diverse world of hybrid arts, comics, cartoons, and graphic literature, and other forms of sequential arts, with a dash of history in the genre and a hearty exploration of contemporary comics. We take time to create our own single-panel and multi-panel comics, zines, graphic poems, and graphic prose.

## **Theatrical Performance: History, Theory and Practice**

*High School Elective*

First, we focus on introductory elements to the study of theatre, including history, acting techniques, script analysis, and familiarization with technical theatre and dramaturgy. Then we begin working towards a performance--perhaps a collection of monologues or scene work, short original works, or a one-act. Classwork and assignments will involve reading, writing, and line memorization.

## **Filmmaking 101**

In Filmmaking class you'll have a ton of fun while also learning crucial skills for this Digital Age. From conceiving great stories and writing engaging scripts, to all the technical tricks of the trade, you will learn to be a filmmaker. Working in crews, students will become proficient in camera operation, audio production, basic directing, lighting, and editing - producing several film projects throughout the semester.

## **WORLD LANGUAGES DEPARTMENT**

With the geographical connection to Latin American countries, as well as the growing number of Spanish speaking people in the United States, fluency in Spanish is essential for interaction within the Americas. And with China's economic, environmental, and political impact on the world on the rise, knowledge of Chinese language and culture is becoming increasingly important for anyone

aspiring to be a global citizen. The mission of the World Languages Department, therefore, is to teach students to negotiate meaning across cultures as part of a foundation for responsible and capable global citizenship. Our methodology is comprehension-based instruction, also known as Comprehensible Input (CI). This means that we aim at making sure our students understand the language imparted in the class. Progressively, we increase the complexity of the input in the target language but always keep it comprehensible.

The Department puts a strong emphasis on developing oral, written, and cultural proficiency through the study and use of authentic materials in context. Such exposure to language and culture advances students' abilities to appreciate different ways of thinking and living. By integrating cultural topics and current events in class, as well as structured and informal interactions with native speakers, we explore the world from the perspectives of Spanish and Chinese speakers.

All students in the 6th grade take Spanish. For the 2021-22 school year, starting in the 7th grade, students can opt to take Chinese instead of Spanish, giving the possibility to graduate with two languages at the end of their high school career.

Depending on enrollment, upper-level courses are often combined to form sections for levels II/III, III/IV and IV/V.

## **Spanish A**

### *6th Grade*

In this yearlong course, students are introduced to the Spanish speaking world through its culture and language. Students learn a starter vocabulary in Spanish giving them a solid foundation for the years ahead. Students help create in-class stories to achieve this. Basic reading materials are presented on a regular basis and it is expected that students do mini-presentations about these stories. We also dedicate a good deal of time to the study of the main ancient civilizations developed in the Americas, with hands-on projects as cornerstones of the units. Throughout the year students also listen to music, dance, act, watch films, play games, and sample foods from Spanish speaking countries. This class is conducted half in Spanish, and half in English.

## **Spanish B**

### *7th grade*

In Spanish B students are exposed to the Spanish language by listening to and creating stories in the target language. Grammar structures introduced are subject and possessive pronouns, definite and indefinite articles and verbs in the present tense as well as essential paragraph connectors. Students read short novels with high-frequency words to solidify acquisition and expand vocabulary. Active student participation is required to strengthen oral skills. Cultural pieces are woven into the lessons with a culminating project at the end of each unit. The class is conducted mainly in Spanish.

## **Spanish C**

*8th grade*

In Spanish C students have solid speaking skills and are able to describe images, carry on brief spontaneous conversations and give presentations without writing aids. The study of irregular forms of the present tense are solidified, and high-frequency verbs are introduced in the past tense. Students are expected to journal once a week increasing the number of words written progressively. The cultural component is delivered through novellas and videos as well as hands-on projects. The class is conducted mainly in Spanish.

## **Spanish II**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Spanish C or equivalent*

In Spanish II students gain confidence in the language via stories, videos and personal interviews. Students develop more complex stories, this time in the past tense. Students read longer novels on a variety of subjects, from folktales to mystery novels to everyday accounts. Spontaneous dialogues are encouraged and class discussion is richer. Longer presentations are required and students are expected to journal once a week. Video projects are commonly used as assessments at the end of the quarter. Class is conducted mainly in Spanish.

## **Spanish III**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Spanish II or equivalent*

This class is taught entirely in Spanish and consolidates the use of present, past and future tenses, expecting students at the end to navigate among all three seamlessly. There is a significant amount of vocabulary covering a broad set of topics such as hobbies and recreational activities, travelling, work, health, politics, and the arts. The storytelling recedes and gives space for more frequent class discussions and questions about student's experiences. This class has a particular focus on historical and contemporary trends in Latin America as well as an emphasis on the cultural diversity of the region. Students read adapted newspaper and magazine articles, as well as novels with a strong cultural component but still modified for students of Spanish. Students also embark on a research project about a cultural topic of their choosing.

## **Spanish IV**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Spanish III or equivalent*

Spanish IV is an advanced study of the language with a topic-centered curriculum revolving around cultural themes. At this level, students are expected to know all the tenses in the indicative mood so that they can now focus on the subjunctive mood. A great emphasis is put on oral fluency as well as

on vocabulary development accomplished by participation in improvisational exercises, debates, and conversations with native speakers through social networks. An essential part of this class is to familiarize students with various cultural aspects of Spanish-speaking countries utilizing music, film, unabridged readings, and the media. Class is conducted fully in Spanish.

## **Spanish V**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Spanish IV or equivalent*

Spanish V is an advanced study of contemporary socio-political, cultural, and environmental topics taught using the elements described in level IV as well as primary sources. Spanish V assumes competency in all tenses as well as a wide range of vocabulary. The class activities include daily class discussions about current events, listening to primary sources and reading longer and more complex novels. Speaking and writing entirely in Spanish is expected. In this class students participate in debates on a regular basis, journaling, conversing with native speakers and watching a series created for a native speaker audience. Students also embark on a research project about a cultural topic of their choosing.

## **Chinese A**

*7th and 8th Grade*

Students in middle school Chinese are immediately immersed in the spoken language through the use of stories. Teachers and students work together to create stories that are made comprehensible and compelling by using strong plots, props, and student actors. Students acquire a solid foundation in the oral and written language through repeated exposure to high-frequency vocabulary and grammatical structures. Chinese characters are introduced immediately, and students learn to read and type. Students narrate stories, describe people and settings, and express their opinions. A variety of games are also used to support students' learning. Students finish the year by reading their first graded Chinese novella. Aspects of Chinese culture, history, and worldview are discussed to facilitate negotiation of meaning.

## **Chinese II**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Chinese A or Chinese I or equivalent*

In Chinese II students expand their vocabulary and acquire more complex grammatical structures. Stories continue to be an essential vehicle for students to improve their abilities to describe, narrate, compare, and explain. More Chinese cultural elements are introduced, and students work with more authentic written and audio materials. Students are able to produce more written pieces, speak more fluently and read several novellas appropriate for this level. Aspects of Chinese culture, history, and worldview are discussed (often in English) to facilitate negotiation of meaning.

### **Chinese III**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Chinese II*

Students in this course transition to an intermediate level of proficiency. In addition to stories that are written to facilitate language acquisition, authentic materials are introduced in the form of music videos, movie trailers, and soap operas providing opportunities for discussions about Chinese culture and worldview. Sentence structure becomes more complex to allow students to describe their daily lives in more detail. Students read several level-appropriate novellas throughout the year. Aspects of Chinese culture, history, and worldview are discussed (often in English) to facilitate negotiation of meaning. Students have opportunities to focus on individual areas of interest.

### **Chinese IV**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Chinese III*

This intermediate-level course uses pictures, news stories, videos, and blogs in addition to stories to allow discussion of different topics. Comparisons are made between Chinese and American culture. The volume of reading continues to increase as students engage in extensive reading to facilitate rapid vocabulary acquisition in a wide variety of areas. Skits and student presentations provide opportunities for students to practice presentational language, while email and messaging exchanges with native Chinese speakers allow students to practice interpersonal and intercultural dialogue. Authentic materials continue to be supplemented by graded novellas appropriate to this level. Aspects of Chinese culture, history, and worldview are discussed (often in English) to facilitate negotiation of meaning. Students have opportunities to focus on individual areas of interest.

### **Chinese V**

*High School*

*Prerequisite: Chinese IV*

Students transition to an advanced level of proficiency in this course. Authentic materials predominate in the form of movies, podcasts, news articles, fictional stories, comics, and other media that showcase cultural issues and facilitate discussion. Students continue to expand vocabulary as they increase their fluency in the use of grammatical structures. Extensive reading continues, and students produce presentations and skits and write emails, stories, and essays.

## **ELECTIVES**

High school students are able to select semester-long elective classes. These courses allow students to explore a topic outside of the traditional disciplines, and dig deeply into new content with multi-age peers. Below are past and current offerings.

## **“A Change is Gonna Come”: Social Change Through Art and Action**

In this class, we explore the art of American social protest movements, reaching back to the coded songs of freedom sung by enslaved Africans, to the visual art of contemporary resistance. Particular social movements that we focus on are the abolitionist movement, women’s suffrage, Civil Rights, labor movements, protests against the Vietnam War, LGBTQ rights, and the environmental movement. Assessments include daily discussions, written responses to the music and visual art that we are examining, and a final gallery night, when students will display the art that they have created depicting an historical or current social movement to members of the community. Proceeds from sales of refreshments at this exhibit benefit a non-profit organization of the class’s choosing. Over the course of the semester, students discover what was and is at stake in the movements for equality in our country, how the work of musicians and visual artists further social change, and how our own identities shape our experiences and perspectives on the world.

## **Filmmaking 101**

In Filmmaking class you'll have a ton of fun while also learning crucial skills for this Digital Age. From conceiving great stories and writing engaging scripts, to all the technical tricks of the trade, you will learn to be a filmmaker. Working in crews, students will become proficient in camera operation, audio production, basic directing, lighting, and editing - producing several film projects throughout the semester.

## **Epidemiology**

In this course, we examine the past, present, and future impacts of human diseases. This class is strongly multidisciplinary, with an emphasis on the biological, historical, and analytical sciences necessary to understand these complex systems. We use Agent Based Modeling and System Dynamics to model diseases, so it is vital that students feel comfortable with applying basic algebra and graphing skills and are willing to explore multiple computer-based platforms/systems/languages.

## **Arranging Music**

Ever wonder what Beethoven would sound like played by a heavy metal band? What about Taylor Swift played on a banjo and harmonica? In this course we develop the tools to create arrangements for various instruments in many different styles of music, and then get to hear our arrangements in action. We think outside the box and use digital notation software to create professional-quality pieces.

## **Environmental Science (Ecology)**

Environmental science is the study of the interactions between physical, biological, and chemical components of the environment. It is an extremely relevant discipline in today's world and we examine many pressing issues including alternative energy sources, climate change, global population

growth, and pollution. We examine the material through laboratory and field investigations, class discussions and lecture, individual and group projects, and field trips.

### **Musical Performance, Arrangement and Composition**

This performance-based course helps us stretch our musical minds and improve our musical skills. We play a variety of instruments and styles and write our own pieces for the group to perform. We also arrange music from various genres and have opportunities to perform out in our community. Musical experience is welcome but not necessary and students will be required to practice at least 60 minutes a week outside of class.

### **Artist Portfolio**

In this studio art class students are guided through the process of creating works that comprise senior level portfolios. Students are allowed more liberty than in standard studio art classes, but this liberty will be accompanied by more instructor guidance in creating rich ideas and then executing those ideas into salient pieces. Students must be ready to work independently exploring truth in art and building portfolio concepts. Each unit explores a variety of contemporary artists and takes several field trips to better understand the mindspace of artists living today.

### **East Asian Cultural Project**

This course is designed to teach students to identify common elements of East Asian culture including Social Organizations, Architecture, Customs and Traditions, Arts, Religions, Economics, Food and Clothing, and Music and Dance. The main focus is on Chinese culture, other Asian cultures including Japanese culture and Korean culture are combined and compared. The students research, cooperate, and contribute to apply their knowledge to theme projects and presentations which illustrate their learning and understanding of a specific Asian culture.

### **Africa**

This elective course serves as an introduction to historical and contemporary Africa, from ancient civilizations such as Ethiopia and Great Zimbabwe to contemporary trends and figures in media, music, fashion, philosophy, literature, and art, such as post-colonial theory, La SAPE, Chinua Achebe, Kalamashaka, or El Anatsui. Carried out through readings, videos, meetings cross-town and cross-continent, we'll engage the historical record as well as the contemporary thinkers and doers who have cumulatively led to the recently coined term "Africa Rising."

### **Senior Internship**

Seniors have the option to engage in internships with local businesses, organizations, and professionals in lieu of an elective. Students select a faculty advisor to oversee their work and complete at least three hours per week of time at a job site as well as reflective assignments throughout the course.

## **ENCOUNTER WEEK PROGRAM**

The Encounter Week program provides some of the most innovative and memorable experiences for Vermont Commons School students. For a week each in September, February, and May, regular academic classes do not meet and instead students form multi-age groups and, along with the entire faculty, embark on a variety of “encounters.” From studying tidal pool ecology in Acadia National Park or exploring art museums and artists in New York City to canoe camping through the Adirondacks, Encounter Weeks engage students with new ideas, people, and challenges, as well as develop the qualities and skills needed to work together as a group. At the beginning of the year, 6th and 9th grade students go on their own, unique trips: 6th graders start to build community and understand their place in the broader community and the 9th-grade class undertakes a week-long bicycle tour together. Later in their Vermont Commons career, older students have the opportunity to embark on leadership training and subsequently act as student leaders for future trips.

Students engage in these challenging but rewarding journeys as fully as they do any other aspect of school. And to that end, teachers write evaluative comments for each student and assess them with a score of 1-5, based on the student’s participation, journal writing, initiative, group cooperation, decorum, and responsibility.

Some past and current Encounter Week offerings include:

### **Acadia National Park**

Students leave for Mount Desert Island in DownEast Maine on Monday, arriving at Blackwoods campground in Acadia National Park in the evening. After setting up camp, they walk a couple of hundred yards to the rocky coast to sit over the waves, under the Milky Way. Tuesday the group climbs the infamous Beehive mountain and feed the critters in Anemone Cave. Wednesday, they take their traditional dip in the North Atlantic (water temp of AT LEAST 35 degrees!!) and spend a contemplative solo hour at the Great Head tide pools. Thursday morning is volunteer trail-work with Friends of Acadia, followed by a naturalist's tour of the waters around Bah Habah in a converted Lobster Boat (BABY SEALS, BAM!!). The day ends with a stroll around town. Friday morning they break camp at around 3:30am to be the first North Americans to see the sunrise from the peak of Cadillac Mountain.

### **Adirondacks Canoeing**

The Most Legendary Adirondack Canoeing Spring Encounter Week (or MLACSEW, for short) consists of a week of paddling and camping along Long Lake, the Raquette River, and Tupper Lake, all of which run along the High Peaks Wilderness area in New York State. Students who choose this trip should be excited to spend an entire week outdoors, regardless of the weather, and be up for the

challenge of constant physical activity. Tarp-sailing! Portage! Stargazing! Fighting Jethro the Champion Bear by the Mount Thunder Fighting Stump! Well, some of those things, anyway. Prior canoeing experience is not required.

### **Volleyball Clinics**

Students travel all over Vermont, teaching volleyball. Volleyball experience is a plus, but students do NOT need to know volleyball or be on the team. They are paired with an experienced player during the beginning of the week...but they then have the option to run their own groups! The entire group works at the King Street Center with young (frequently New American) kids in their afterschool program, and they also work with elementary, middle, and high schools such as; Milton, Mater Christi, and Charlotte. In addition, students also work with some adult recreational players during a night league at Edmunds Middle School.

### **Music Immersion**

Students spend the week learning about many facets of our amazing local music community! They play various instruments including piano, guitar, ukulele and steel drums, visit music stores around the area, learn about luthiery, compose electronic music, participate in a music therapy demonstration, attend performances around town and have our own group performance. Musical experience is welcome but not required.

### **Vermont's Dairy Farms: A Documentary Road Trip**

Students grab video cameras and take to the road! With an investigative journalist's eye they head out around Vermont to dig behind the scenes of the changing terrain of our state's iconic livelihood: Dairy Farming. They learn what has led to a historic and pioneering partnership between farmers, farmworkers, between Migrant Justice and Ben And Jerry's, in the Milk With Dignity Campaign. From our campground homebase, students venture out each day to learn a bit more of the vast, complex web of issues that this industry and this campaign touches on. They talk with people on all sides of the issue, to capture great video footage, and to make their own short documentaries. Students deepen and broaden the quick 'headlines' about the loss of dairy farms in Vermont. They learn what has shaped, in large part, Vermont's history and its pastoral landscape and develop their skills as a storyteller, filmmaker and journalist.

### **White Mountains Backpacking**

On this classic Encounter Week students spend the week backpacking, carrying all the gear on their backs from campsite to campsite in the White Mountains in New Hampshire and Maine. They expand their wilderness skills (navigation, stoves, cooking, tents, expedition behavior, and more) as they hike the biggest mountains in the Northeast. Depending on the make-up of the group, they explore either the Grafton Notch Loop or climb the peaks around the Pemigewasset Wilderness.

## **Winter Writing Retreat**

In this Encounter Week, students devote five days to the writing craft, completing exercises in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. In addition to writing, students spend time snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and sledding on the land surrounding the cabin in which they are staying. Indoor activities, beyond reading other students' work and writing their own, include playing games and cooking meals together. Participants on this Encounter Week expand their minds by responding to creative writing prompts, giving feedback on each other's work, and reading texts by published writers for guidance and inspiration.

## **Big Trips**

Each year Vermont Commons School designs trips to far-off destinations that require additional fees. Students who receive financial aid from the school may have \$1,000 toward Big Trips during their time at the school. In the past students have traveled to Belize, China, Ireland, and domestic locations; such as Crow Canyon in Colorado and St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands.. These trips coincide with the weeks designated for the Encounter Week Program. *Students fill out applications during the spring of the prior year.* Trips in 2018-19 include a visit to our sister school, El Colegio Santa Ana, in Peru, a week at the Teton Science School doing outdoor winter research, working for the National Park Service in St. John USVI maintaining parkland and a Chinese food, art and culture trip to NYC.

## **SENIOR PROJECT PROGRAM**

The Vermont Commons School experience culminates with a Senior Project. At the end of their spring semester, seniors may choose to spend five weeks on their Senior Projects in lieu of attending regular classes. Individual projects are designed and implemented by seniors under the guidance of a faculty project advisor. The senior project gives students the opportunity to explore a field of interest, to pursue a possible career or attain a skill, and to gain a sense of the professional world outside the classroom.

The goals of this program are to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, to provide seniors with time to reflect on their experiences at the Vermont Commons School, and to pursue intensive study on a topic of their choosing. The Senior Projects mark a transition point for the seniors; the program allows them to creatively tie together their personal interests and academic experiences as they make the transition from high school to future pursuits.

## **WELLNESS**

### **Study Skills and Wellness**

*6th grade*

In the first semester, a study skills course is taught by the 6th grade team. In the second semester, the wellness course includes social and emotional learning, health, conflict resolution, and other developmentally appropriate topics.

### **Health, Wellness & Life Skills**

#### *7-8th grades*

Health seminars are held once a quarter during either morning or afternoon classes. These health seminars are taught by the Dean of Students and utilize the support of the core level group advisors. In addition to these content-driven sessions there is time for students to meet in small groups or one-on-one with the Dean of Students to ask questions or to discuss topics in further detail. During class, students will be given information on the following topic areas: Plagiarism, Study Skills, Time Management, Conflict Resolution, Anxiety, Exercise, Healthy Body Image, Drugs and Alcohol, Puberty, Healthy Relationships, Gender vs. Sexuality, Nutrition, Sleep and Happiness.

### **High School Health and Wellness**

The goals of the Health and Wellness program are:

- 1.) To provide helpful information and resources to students.
- 2.) To provide a safe space for student to share perspectives and questions with peers and facilitators.
- 3.) To encourage ongoing discussions of important health and wellness topics among members of the community both at school and at home.

Broad topics include: sex education, mental health, drugs/alcohol, and nutrition.

#### *9th grade*

Discussions revolve around consent and respectful relationships, understanding stress and depression, and basic information about drug abuse and misuse.

#### *10th grade*

The focus this year is on contraception and STDS, manifestation of anxiety and coping strategies and nutrition/food decisions.

#### *11th grade*

The topics include gender and sexual identities, impacts of pornography, the science of happiness and the challenges of addiction.

#### *12th grade*

Students provide some direction in this year, though we will include conversations on enthusiastic consent and continue discussions on managing stress and anxiety.

## **PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

All middle school students take P.E. twice a week. P.E. offers a unique opportunity to learn about lifelong fitness and to engage informally with the faculty outside of the classroom. Each student chooses from a list of options. Current and past choices include jogging at Shelburne Farms, Capture the Flag in the woods, strength training, pickup basketball and lawn volleyball. Our extracurricular athletics also meet during PE time. High school students complete their P.E. requirement by combining two of the following options: an active encounter week, a Vermont Commons sport season, and/or an outside of school physical activity taking place at least two hours per week over four months. High school students must complete the above requirements three of their four years.

## **EXTRACURRICULAR SPORTS**

The primary goal of the VCS athletic program is to foster sportsmanship, leadership, and personal growth. Student-athletes learn to balance academic responsibility with responsibility to their teammates. The team experience is open to any academically eligible VCS student. While the objective of any competition is to win, this is secondary to the primary goal of the VCS athletic program. Vermont Commons School currently fields inter-scholastic teams in the following sports: Volleyball (boys, girls, and co-ed); Cross-country (co-ed); Basketball (boys); and Ultimate Frisbee (co-ed).

## **FACULTY AND STAFF**

Kat Aherns

Chair, Mathematics Department, Encounter Week Co-Director, Appointed 2017  
University of Vermont, B.S.

Katherine Bailey

Registrar, Theatre Director, Appointed 2014  
Bennington College, B.A.

Kristen Bellone

Receptionist, Appointed 2021

Linda Bursell

Business Manager, Appointed 2010  
Champlain College, A.S., University of Vermont, B.S.

Frances Cannon

Art instructor, English instructor, Appointed 2020  
University of Vermont, B.F.A., University of Iowa, M.F.A.

Chance Cardamone-Knewstubb  
Spanish Instructor, Ultimate Frisbee Coach, Appointed 2003  
SUNY Binghamton, B.A., Tulane University, M.A.

Mark Cline Lucey  
Social Studies Instructor, Director of Senior Projects, Appointed 2004  
Connecticut College, B.A., Brooklyn College, M.A.

Jennifer Cohen  
English Instructor, Appointed 2004  
University of Notre Dame, B.A., Harvard University, M.T.S., University of Washington, M.A.T.E.S.L.

Adriana Comtois  
Chair, World Languages Department, Spanish Instructor, Appointed 2004  
Universidad Ricardo Palma, B.A., Saint Michael's College, M.A.

Matt Davide  
Chair, Arts Department, Music Instructor, Cross Country Coach, Appointed 2016  
University of Vermont, B.S.

Jasmine Easter  
Assistant Head of School, Appointed 2008  
Ithaca College, B.A.

Peter Goff  
Chair, Science Department, Volleyball Coach, Appointed 1997  
Hobart College, B.S., University of Vermont, M.S.

Tim Harger  
Dean of Students, Appointed 2019  
Haverford College, B.A., Columbia University, M.A.

Ryan Houck  
Chair, English Department, Appointed 2019  
Cornell University, B.A., Bread Loaf School of English, M.A.

Mark Keegan

Science Instructor, Appointed 2013

Northeastern University, B.S., Cornell University, Ph.D.

Dexter Mahaffey

Head of School, Appointed 2014

Middlebury College, B.A., Bread Loaf School of English, M.A., University of Louisville, Ph.D.

Kathryn McDermott

Chair, Social Studies Department, Cross Country Coach Appointed 2018

Middlebury College, B.A., Georgetown University, M.A.

Kris Mohlman

Science Instructor, Mathematics Instructor, Basketball Coach, Appointed 2015

Bowdoin College, B.A.

Jill Strawbridge

Director of Admissions, Appointed 2013

University of South Alabama, B.A.

Tonya Waldron

Mathematics Instructor, Appointed 2018

University of New Hampshire, B.S., University of New Hampshire, M.Ed

Ben Wang

Chinese Instructor, Social Studies Instructor, Encounter Week Co-Director, Appointed 2010

Stanford University, B.A., University of Vermont, M.S.

Vermont Commons School admits qualified students irrespective of race, color, religion, gender and sexual identity, national origin, or disability. All students are afforded the rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to our students. The school does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender and sexual identity, national origin, or disability in the administration of its educational programs, admission, scholarships and loans, athletics, or other school policies.

